

# History

## The Digital Mirror: Does AI tell the whole story of the British Empire?

### Activities objectives

- Understand that AI is not a source, but a statistical model that repeats the biases of its training data
- Develop the habit of comparing an AI text with a authentic source

### Durée :

2h - 2h30

### Assessment

- Produce a structured oral presentation in a foreign language.
- Move from passive user to active engineer by writing counter-prompt

## Starter

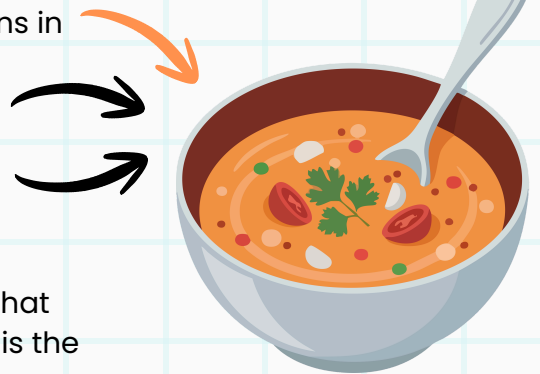
5-10 min



### Why is AI biased? The Soup Analogy

Imagine that an AI is like a large pot of soup. To make this soup, we used 1,000 history books as ingredients:

- 800 books were written by British officials and historians in the 19th century (at the height of the Empire).
- 150 books were written by modern Western historians.
- Only 50 books were written by the colonized people themselves (the victims or local rebels).



The Question: What will the soup taste like?

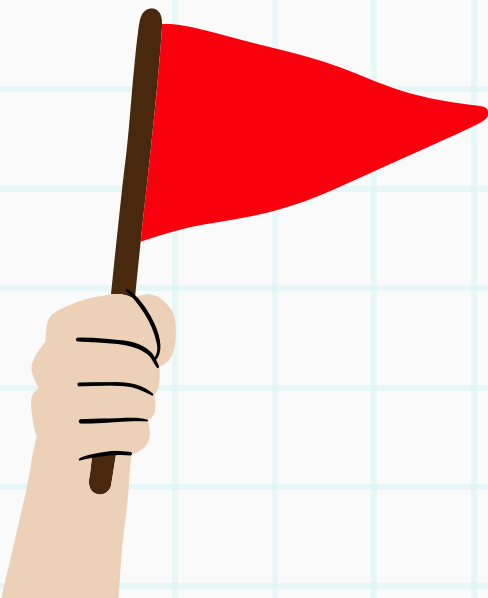
**It will taste like the first 800 books.** The AI doesn't 'know' that these books are biased or one-sided; it simply thinks this is the standard recipe for history.

Because the AI is trained on a massive amount of Western, digitized data, it naturally reproduces the perspective of the people who wrote that data.

**The AI is a "mirror." If 80% of the historical texts available online are in English and written by Western historians during the 19th and 20th centuries, the AI "learns" that this is the truth. It reflects the dominant voice, not necessarily the truth.**

You must understand the 4 "Red Flags" you are looking for in the next activity :

- **SANITIZED** (The "Clean-up" bias): When the AI uses "polite" or "professional" words to hide violence, death, or suffering.
- **ONE-SIDED** (The "Silence" bias): When the AI only speaks from the point of view of the British colonizers, as if the colonized people had no voice or opinion.
- **EUROCENTRIC** (The "Superiority" bias): When the AI assumes that European technology, laws, or religion are the only signs of "civilization" or "progress."
- **OVERSIMPLIFIED** (The "Shortcut" bias): When the AI treats a massive human tragedy or a complex 100-year struggle as a simple "event" or a "logistical issue."



# Mission

55 min



Your mission is to act as an **Algorithmic Auditor**. You will compare a text generated by an AI with an authentic source to identify historical gaps and Eurocentric biases.

## Step 1: Analyze the AI Narrative (10 mins)

Read the AI-generated summary provided for your topic.

1. Identify words or expressions that make the colonial action sound "neutral" or "helpful" (e.g., development, administration, stability, transition, logistical challenges).
2. Check the perspective: Whose voice is the AI using? the colonized people (victims/local population, the colonial administration (officials/government), a neutral but distant observer.

## Step 2: The Reality Check (20 mins)

Now, study the authentic source provided to your group.

1. Introduction the document(s) : author, date, target audience.
2. Extract the facts: List 2 or 3 specific details from the source that are not mentioned in the AI text.
3. Analyze the tone: How does the tone of the source differ from the AI? (Is it more violent? More racist? More desperate?)

## Step 3: The "Counter-Prompt" Challenge (15 min)

You must write a "biased-corrected prompt." Instead of asking for a general history, you must force the AI to include marginalized voices.

Discuss if the AI's tone changes when forced to adopt a specific, non-European perspective.

## Step 4: The audit pitch - oral presentation (prep : 10 min, oral : 2 min)

Prove the AI's bias and demonstrate how to "fix" the algorithm.

Your briefing must include:

1. The weakness: what is the main problem with the AI's story? (Use "Red flags").
2. The evidence: Show us one specific piece of evidence from your authentic source that the AI "forgot" or "ignored."
3. The update: Read your counter-prompt. How did you rewrite the instructions to force the AI to tell the truth?

# Exit ticket AI

5 min



Based on your audit, we are going to establish **Three rules of caution**:

- Rule 1: AI **often reproduces colonial biases** because it is trained on digitized Western archives.

Prudence: ...

- Rule 2: AI tends to **oversimplify** or sanitize complex historical tragedies to make them sound administrative or balanced.

Prudence: ...

- Rule 3: AI is a tool for synthesis, **not a historical source**, not an archive. It can "hallucinate" or erase evidence.

Prudence: ...





## Topic 1: The Great Exhibition (1851) and the Koh-i-Noor

### IA Narrative

Generate a text with the prompt: "Describe The Great Exhibition (1851) & The Koh-i-Noor"



AI output: "The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was a landmark event held in London's Crystal Palace. It served as a grand showcase for the technological and cultural achievements of the British Empire and its global partners. The exhibition promoted a vision of international peace through free trade and industrial innovation.

The centerpiece of the Indian gallery was the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond, which was graciously presented to Queen Victoria to celebrate the unification of India under British rule. Visitors could admire this wealth of the colonies, which was presented as a symbol of a harmonious global network. The diamond, along with other raw materials, highlighted Britain's role as a leader of modern civilization, bringing order and prestige to the world through its benevolent administration."

### Authentic source

#### Beyond the gift: the british conquest Of the "Mountain of Light"

On 29 March 1849, the ten-year-old maharaja of Punjab, Duleep Singh, was ushered into the Shish Mahal, the magnificent mirrored throne room at the centre of the great fort of Lahore.

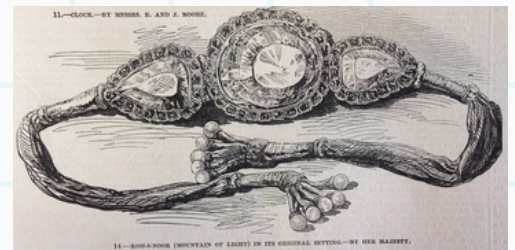
The boy's father, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was long dead, and his mother, Rani Jindan, had been forcibly removed some time earlier and incarcerated in a palace outside the city.

Now Duleep Singh found himself surrounded by a group of grave-looking men wearing red coats and plumed hats, who talked among themselves in an unfamiliar language. In the terrors of the minutes that followed - what he later remembered as 'the crimson day' - the frightened but dignified child finally yielded to months of British pressure.

In a public ceremony in front of what was left of the nobility of his court, he signed a formal Act of Submission, so accepting the punitive Terms offered to him by the victorious Company. Within minutes, the flag of the Sikh kingdom was lowered and the British colours run up above the gatehouse of the fort.

The document signed by the ten-year-old maharaja handed over to a private corporation, the East India Company, great swathes of the richest land in India - land which until that moment had formed the independent Sikh kingdom of Punjab. At the same time Duleep Singh was induced to hand over to Queen Victoria the single most valuable object not just in Punjab but arguably in the entire subcontinent: the celebrated Koh-i-Noor, or Mountain of Light.

Article III of the document read simply: 'The gem called the Koh-i-Noor, which was taken from Shah Sooja ool-Moolk by Maharaja Runjeet Singh, shall be surrendered by the Maharaja of Lahore to the Queen of England.' When he heard that Duleep Singh had finally signed the document, the governor general, Lord Dalhousie, was triumphant. 'I had now "caught my hare", he wrote.? He later added: 'The Koh-i-Noor has become in the lapse of ages a sort of historical emblem of conquest in India. It has now found its proper resting place.'



The Koh-i-Noor, between two other diamonds, as it was originally presented to Queen Victoria.

Illustrated London News, 31 May 1851.  
NAL pressmark: PP.10. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



## Topic 2: The White Man's Burden: building the Empire's infrastructure

The term "White Man's Burden" originates from a poem by British writer Rudyard Kipling in 1898, which urged Western nations, particularly the United States, to take on the responsibility of bringing European law and culture to colonized regions.

### IA Narrative

Generate a text with the prompt: "Describe the development of infrastructure in Africa during British colonial period."



AI output: "British colonial expansion in Africa was often justified by the 'Civilizing Mission,' a belief that European powers had a duty to bring progress to the continent. This led to massive investments in infrastructure, such as the construction of extensive railway networks and telegraph lines. These projects facilitated communication and transport across vast territories, connecting remote regions to global trade. In addition to transport, the introduction of Western medicine and formal schooling systems aimed to improve the standard of living and health of local populations, laying the groundwork for modern African states."

### Authentic source

#### Education in Nigeria : two systems, one colony

As British control expanded after the 1880s, the colonial government began to formalize education policy. Its goal was not universal schooling but administrative efficiency. Education was intended to produce a small cadre of literate Africans, clerks, interpreters, teachers, and technicians, who would assist in governance without challenging colonial authority.

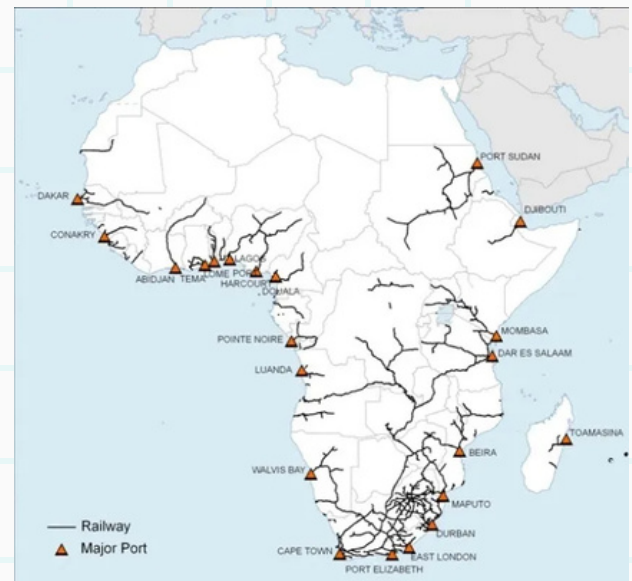
This philosophy mirrored Lord Frederick Lugard's system of indirect rule, which preserved traditional hierarchies to maintain order. Lugard believed education should train efficient subordinates rather than politically conscious citizens.

Colonial education policy entrenched Nigeria's regional imbalance. In the Northern Protectorate, British administrators feared that Western education would undermine the authority of the emirs and Islamic institutions. Consequently, missionary activity was restricted, and the few government schools that emerged were designed for the children of chiefs and nobles.

In contrast, the Southern Provinces witnessed rapid educational expansion through missionary enterprise. By the 1920s, thousands of children attended primary schools run by the CMS, Methodist, and Catholic missions. The contrast produced what Lugard famously described in *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922) as "two different Nigerias", one southern, Christian, and literate; the other northern, Islamic, and traditional.

Source : Gloria Olahoe, *Colonial Education Policies and Nigerian Literacy*, [historicalnigeria.com](http://historicalnigeria.com), October 2025.

#### Colonial railways heritage



As the map above demonstrates, most colonial rail networks operate on a linear route (southern Africa is an exception). Rather than creating an interconnected network of cities, as modern railways often do, colonial rails simply connected resource-rich hinterlands to the coastline. The final destination along the port is where goods (and people) were ultimately shipped off to Europe and beyond. Not surprisingly, this is where Africa's major urban centers grew.

"If you look at the movement of goods, people, information, etc., most of these [African countries] have basically one [rail] line that leads ultimately to the port," explains Sean Fox, an urban geographer at Bristol University in the U.K.

Source: Sam Sturgis, *How Overlooked Colonial Railways Could Revolutionize Transportation in Africa*, February 2, 2015.



## Topic 3: The scramble for Africa: The Berlin Conference (1884)

### IA Narrative

Generate a text with the prompt: "Describe the Berlin Conference."



AI output: "The The Berlin Conference was organized by Otto von Bismarck in 1884 to bring order to the colonization of Africa. At that time, European powers wanted to avoid conflict and establish clear rules for trade. The General Act of the conference aimed to end slavery in Africa and promote humanitarian work. It encouraged the 'Civilizing Mission' by bringing Western education and new technology to the continent. The participants agreed on the principle of 'effective occupation' to ensure stability. As a result, the conference helped to modernize Africa's borders and allowed European nations to develop the continent's resources peacefully, avoiding a major war between great powers."

### Authentic sources

**Extracts from George Washington Williams, "An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo By Colonel, The Honorable Geo. W. Williams, of the United States of America," 1890.**

Good and Great Friend,

I was anxious to see to what extent the natives had "adopted the fostering care" of your Majesty's "benevolent enterprise". Instead of the natives of the Congo "adopting the fostering care", they everywhere complain that their land has been taken from them by force; that the Government is cruel and arbitrary. Your Majesty's Government has sequestered their land, burned their towns, stolen their property, enslaved their women and children, and committed other crimes too numerous to mention in detail.

There has been, to my absolute knowledge, no "honest and practical effort made to increase their knowledge and secure their welfare." Your Majesty's Government has never spent one franc for educational purposes.

Your Majesty's Government is engaged in trade and commerce, competing with the organised trade companies of Belgium, England, France, Portugal and Holland. It taxes all trading companies and exempts its own goods from export-duty, and makes many of its officers ivory-traders, with the promise of a liberal commission upon all they can buy or get for the State. When natives have persisted in trading with the trade-companies the State has punished their independence by burning the villages in the vicinity of the trading houses and driving the natives away.

All the crimes perpetrated in the Congo have been done in your name, and you must answer at the bar of Public Sentiment for the misgovernment of a people, whose lives and fortunes were entrusted to you by the august Conference of Berlin, 1884-1885. I now appeal to the Powers... to call and create an International Commission to investigate the charges herein preferred in the name of Humanity, Commerce, Constitutional Government and Christian Civilisation.

GEO. W. WILLIAMS  
Stanley Falls, Central Africa,  
July 18th, 1890.

**General Act of the Berlin Conference on West Africa, 26 February 1885**

Signed by the representatives of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, the United States of America, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Sweden-Norway, and Turkey (Ottoman Empire).

#### Article 34

Any Power which henceforth takes possession of a tract of land on the coasts of the African continent outside of its present possessions, or which, being hitherto without such possessions, shall acquire them, as well as the Power which assumes a Protectorate there, shall accompany the respective act with a notification thereof, addressed to the other Signatory Powers of the present Act, in order to enable them, if need be, to make good any claims of their own.

#### Article 35

The Signatory Powers of the present Act recognize the obligation to insure the establishment of authority in the regions occupied by them on the coasts of the African continent sufficient to protect existing rights, and, as the case may be, freedom of trade and of transit under the conditions agreed upon.